MASTERING CREATIVITY

Break Through Mental Blocks, Uncover Your Creative Genius, and Make Brilliance a Habit

JAMES CLEAR

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MASTERING CREATIVITY, 1st Edition

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From James Clear:

For most of my life, I didn't consider myself to be particularly creative. I didn't play a musical instrument (or even know how to read music). I wasn't skilled at drawing or painting, or really anything that involved the words “arts” or “crafts.”

It wasn't until I moved to Scotland and decided to buy a camera to “take some pictures while I'm over there” that I discovered that creativity was something that could be developed. Over the next year, I took more than 100,000 photos.

Fast forward to today and I pursue creative tasks all of the time. Every Monday and Thursday, I publish a new article on JamesClear.com and display creativity as a writer. Occasionally, I'll add some hand-drawn images to those articles. And, of course, I'm still bouncing around the world taking photos and trying to tell compelling stories as a photographer.

I'm not sure what your creative goals are, but I am sure that you can make progress towards them. I wrote *Mastering Creativity* to share the lessons I've learned and to express one simple truth about creativity: you have brilliance inside of you, but only if you can find the guts and grit to pull it out of yourself.

Let's get to it...

10 THINGS THIS GUIDE WILL TEACH YOU

1. How to overcome the mental blocks that prevent creativity.
2. How to be creative, even if it's not natural for you.
3. How to make time for creative work if you're busy.
4. How the world's greatest artists approach the task of creating.
5. How to make creating a consistent habit.
6. Why smart people should create things.
7. One simple trick that makes it easier to be creative.
8. How to stay motivated over the long run.
9. Why it is important to generate a lot of work to find your creativity.
10. And most importantly, how to make these ideas a habit in real life.

Table of Contents

How to Find Your Hidden Creative Genius	5
How Creative Geniuses Come Up With Great Ideas	6
How to Uncover Your Creative Talent by Using the “Equal Odds Rule”	9
The Myth of Creative Inspiration	12
The Difference Between Professionals and Amateurs	16
The Weird Strategy Dr. Seuss Used to Create His Greatest Work	21
How to Be Motivated to Create Consistently	26
Smart People Should Create Things	31
The Next Step: Where to Go From Here	34
Sources	35

How to Find Your Hidden Creative Genius

There is a interesting story about how Pablo Picasso, the famous Spanish artist, developed the ability to produce remarkable work in just minutes.

As the story goes, Picasso was walking though the market one day when a woman spotted him. She stopped the artist, pulled out a piece of paper and said, “Mr. Picasso, I am a fan of your work. Please, could you do a little drawing for me?”

Picasso smiled and quickly drew a small, but beautiful piece of art on the paper. Then, he handed the paper back to her saying, “That will be one million dollars.”

“But Mr. Picasso,” the woman said. “It only took you thirty seconds to draw this little masterpiece.”

“My good woman,” Picasso said, “It took me thirty years to draw that masterpiece in thirty seconds.” [1]

Picasso isn’t the only brilliant creative who worked for decades to master his craft. His journey is typical of many creative geniuses. Even people of considerable talent rarely produce incredible work before decades of practice.

Let’s talk about why that is, and even more important, how you can reveal your own creative genius.

How Creative Geniuses Come Up With Great Ideas

In 2002, Markus Zusak sat down to write a book.

He began by mapping out the beginning and the end of the story. Then, he started listing out chapter headings, pages of them. Some made it into the final story, many were cut.

When Zusak began to write out the story itself, he tried narrating it from the perspective of Death. It didn't come out the way he wanted.

He re-wrote the book, this time through the main character's eyes. Again, something was off.

He tried writing it from an outsider's perspective. Still no good.

He tried present tense. He tried past tense. Nothing. The text didn't flow.

He revised. He changed. He edited. By his own estimation, Zusak rewrote the first part of the book 150 to 200 times. In the end, he went back to his original choice and wrote it from the perspective of Death. This time—the 200th time—it felt right. When all was said and done it had taken Zusak three years to write his novel. He called it The Book Thief.

In an interview after his book was finally released, Zusak said, "In three years, I must have failed over a thousand times, but each failure brought me closer to

what I needed to write, and for that, I'm grateful." [2]

The book exploded in popularity. It stayed on the New York Times best-seller list for over 230 weeks. It sold 8 million copies. It was translated into 40 languages. A few years later, Hollywood came calling and turned The Book Thief into a major motion picture.

The Simple Secret to Having Good Luck

We often think that blockbuster successes are luck. Maybe it's easier to explain success that way—as a chance happening, a fortunate outlier. No doubt, there is always some element of luck involved in every success story.

But Markus Zusak is proof that if you revise your work 200 times—if you find 200 ways to reinvent yourself, to get better at your craft—then luck seems to have a way of finding you.

How do creative geniuses come ups with great ideas? They work and edit and rewrite and retry and pull out their genius through sheer force of will and perseverance. They earn the chance to be lucky because they keep showing up.

In her Dartmouth Commencement Address, Shonda Rimes shares a strategy that echoes Zusak's approach…

> *Dreams do not come true just because you dream them. It's hard work that makes things happen. It's hard work that creates change…*
>
> *Ditch the dream and be a doer, not a dreamer.*

> *Maybe you know exactly what it is you dream of being, or maybe you're paralyzed because you have no idea what your passion is. The truth is, it doesn't matter. You don't have to know. You just have to keep moving forward. You just have to keep doing something, seizing the next opportunity, staying open to trying something new. It doesn't have to fit your vision of the perfect job or the perfect life. Perfect is boring and dreams are not real. Just … do.*

So you think, "I wish I could travel." Great. Sell your crappy car, buy a ticket to Bangkok, and go. Right now. I'm serious. You want to be a writer? A writer is someone who writes every day, so start writing.

How Creativity Works

We all have some type of creative genius inside of us. The only way to release it is to work on it.

No single act will uncover more creative powers than forcing yourself to create consistently. For Markus Zusak that meant writing and re-writing 200 times. For you, it might mean singing a song over and over until it sounds right. Or programming a piece of software until all the bugs are out, taking portraits of your friends until the lighting is perfect, or caring for the customers you serve until you know them better than they know themselves. You can make any job a work of art if you put the right energy into it.

How do creative geniuses come up with great ideas? They work hard at it.

How to Uncover Your Creative Talent by Using the "Equal Odds Rule"

Paul Erdos was a strange man. He lived out of two suitcases, never learned how to cook his own meals, worked up to 19 hours per day, took amphetamines daily and washed them down with caffeine, and gave away nearly all of the money that he earned. [3]

Erdos was also the most prolific mathematician of the 20th century. He wrote or co-authored over 1,500 mathematical articles during his career and partnered with over 500 different collaborators. As you would expect, his contributions to mathematics were significant.

Erdos solved a variety of difficult problems. He worked out a proof for the prime number theorem. He led the development of Ramsey theory. He discovered the proof for a difficult mathematical riddle known as Bertrand's postulate. Long story short, Erdos was good. He worked his tail off and advanced the field of mathematics because of it.

And yet, do you know what became of the vast majority of his 1,500 articles and papers?

Nothing. They are long gone. Forgotten. Tucked away in the archives of an old research journal or filed into a box at the bottom of some math lover's closet. And that is why the story of Paul Erdos is perhaps the best example of what is known as the Equal Odds Rule.

Let's talk about what this rule means and how it can help you uncover your creative talent.

The Equal Odds Rule

In 1977, a Harvard-trained psychologist named Keith Simonton, developed a theory that he called the Equal Odds Rule.

"The Equal Odds Rule says that the average publication of any particular scientist does not have any statistically different chance of having more of an impact than any other scientist's average publication." [4] In other words, any given scientist is equally likely to create a game-changing piece of work as they are to create something average that is quickly forgotten.

Translated to the world at-large: You can't predict your own success. Scientists, artists, inventors, writers, entrepreneurs, and workers of all types are equally likely to produce a useless project as they are to produce an important one.

If you believe the Equal Odds Rule, then the natural conclusion is that you're playing a numbers game. Because you can't predict your success, the best strategy is to produce as much work as possible, which will provide more opportunities to hit the bullseye and create something meaningful. [5]

I've seen the Equal Odds Rule at play in my own work each month. I write new articles every Monday and Thursday. I know that if I write a new article every Monday and Thursday, then that will be about 8 or 9 articles per month on average. And if I write 8 or 9 articles per month, then 2 or 3 of them will be decent.

Which 2 or 3 will be winners? I have no idea.

After sticking to this schedule for almost two years, it has become very clear to me that I am a rather terrible judge of my own work. All I can do is try my best each time, commit to doing a volume of work, and trust if I stick with the process then something useful will find it's way from my hands to the keyboard.

The Willingness to Create Garbage

Paul Erdos knew something that all great creators eventually discover: Creative genius only reveals itself after you've shown up enough times to get the average ideas out of the way. Time after time, problem after problem, Erdos kept working on his craft. 1,500 papers later, it turns out he had some pretty good ideas.

If you want to extract your creative genius and make a difference, then embracing idea behind the Equal Odds Rule is a useful strategy. Sometimes you'll create something good. Sometimes you'll create something useless. But no matter what, you should always be creating.

If you want to make a masterpiece, you have to be willing to create a little garbage along the way.

The Myth of Creative Inspiration

Franz Kafka is considered one of the most creative and influential writers of the 20th century, but he actually spent most of his time working as a lawyer for the Workers Accident Insurance Institute. How did Kafka produce such fantastic creative works while holding down his day job?

By sticking to a strict schedule.

He would go to his job from 8:30 AM to 2:30 PM, eat lunch and then take a long nap until 7:30 PM, exercise and eat dinner with his family in the evening, and then begin writing at 11 PM for a few hours each night before going to bed and doing it all over again.

Kafka is hardly unique in his commitment to a schedule. As Mason Currey notes in his popular book, Daily Rituals: How Artists Work, many of the world's great artists follow a consistent schedule.

Maya Angelou rented a local hotel room and went there to write. She arrived at 6:30 AM, wrote until 2 PM, and then went home to do some editing. She never slept at the hotel.

Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon writes five nights per week from 10 PM to 3 AM.

Haruki Murakami wakes up at 4 AM, writes for five hours, and then goes for

a run.

The work of top creatives isn't dependent upon motivation or inspiration, but rather it follows a consistent pattern and routine. It's the mastering of daily habits that leads to creative success, not some mythical spark of genius.

Here's why...

Daily Routines

William James, the famous psychologist, is noted for saying that habits and schedules are important because they "free our minds to advance to really interesting fields of action."

An article in The Guardian agreed by saying, "If you waste resources trying to decide when or where to work, you'll impede your capacity to do the work." And there are plenty of research studies on willpower and motivation to back up that statement.

In other words, if you're serious about creating something compelling, you need to stop waiting for motivation and inspiration to strike you and simply set a schedule for doing work on a consistent basis. Of course, that's easy to say, but much harder to do in practice.

Here's one way of thinking about schedules that may help...

Permission to Create Junk

Weightlifting offers a good metaphor for scheduling creative work.

I can't predict whether or not I'll set a PR (personal record) before I go to the gym. In fact, there will be many days when I'll have a below average workout. Eventually, I figured out that those below average days were just part of the process. The only way to actually lift bigger weights was to continually show up every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday — regardless of whether any individual workout was good or bad.

Creative work is no different than training in the gym. You can't selectively choose your best moments and only work on the days when you have great ideas. The only way to unveil the great ideas inside of you is to go through a volume of work, put in your repetitions, and show up over and over again.

Obviously, doing something below average is never the goal. But you have to give yourself permission to grind through the occasional days of below average work because it's the price you have to pay to get to excellent work.

If you're anything like me, you hate creating something that isn't excellent. It's easy to start judging your work and convince yourself to not share something, not publish something, and not ship something because "this isn't good enough yet."

But the alternative is even worse: if you don't have a schedule forcing you to deliver, then it's really easy to avoid doing the work at all. The only way to be consistent enough to make a masterpiece is to give yourself permission to create junk along the way.

The Schedule is the System

During a conversation about writing, my friend Sarah Peck looked at me and said, “A lot of people never get around to writing because they are always wondering when they are going to write next.”

You could say the same thing about working out, starting a business, creating art, and building most habits. The schedule is the system that makes your goals a reality. If you don’t set a schedule for yourself, then your only option is to rely on motivation.

If your workout doesn’t have a time when it usually occurs, then each day you’ll wake up thinking, “I hope I feel motivated to exercise today.”

If your business doesn’t have a system for marketing, then you’ll show up at work crossing your fingers that you’ll find a way to get the word out (in addition to everything else you have to do).

If you don’t have a time block to write every week, then you’ll find yourself saying things like, “I just need to find the willpower to do it.”

Stop waiting for motivation or inspiration to strike you and set a schedule for your habits.

The Difference Between Professionals and Amateurs

Last summer, I was speaking with a man named Todd Henry. Todd is a successful author and does a great job of putting out valuable work on a consistent basis.

I, on the other hand, do a remarkable job of putting out questionable work on an inconsistent basis. I started to explain this to Todd…

“Todd, what do you think about writing only when you feel motivated? I feel like I always do my best work when I get a spark of creativity or inspiration, but that only happens every now and then. I’m pretty much only writing when I feel like it, which means I’m inconsistent. But if I write all the time, then I’m not creating my best work.”

“That’s cool,” Todd replied. “I only write when I’m motivated too. I just happened to be motivated every day at 8am.”

The Difference Between Professionals and Amateurs

It doesn’t matter what you are trying to become better at, if you only do the work when you’re motivated, then you’ll never be consistent enough to become a professional.

The ability to show up everyday, stick to the schedule, and do the work — especially when you don't feel like it — is so valuable that it is literally all you need to become better 99% of the time.

I've seen this in my own experiences…

When I don't miss workouts, I get in the best shape of my life. When I write every week, I become a better writer. When I travel and take my camera out every day, I take better photos.

It's simple and powerful. But why is it so difficult?

The Pain of Being A Pro

Approaching your goals — whatever they are — with the attitude of a professional isn't easy. In fact, being a pro is painful.

The simple fact of the matter is that most of the time we are inconsistent. We have goals that we would like to achieve and dreams that we would like to fulfill, but we only work towards them occasionally; when we feel inspired or motivated or when life allows us to do so. It's just easier that way.

I can guarantee that if you set a schedule for any task and start sticking to it, there will be days when you feel like quitting. When you start a business, there will be days when you don't feel like showing up. When you're at the gym, there will be sets that you don't feel like finishing. When it's time to write, there will be reports that you don't feel like typing. But stepping up when it's annoying or painful or draining to do so, that's what makes you a pro.

Professionals stick to the schedule, amateurs let life get in the way. Professionals know what is important to them and work towards it with purpose, amateurs get pulled off course by the urgencies of life.

You'll Never Regret Starting Important Work

Some people might think I'm promoting the benefits of being a workaholic. "Professionals work harder than everyone else and that's why they're great." Actually, that's not it at all.

Being a pro is about having the discipline to commit to what is important to you instead of merely saying something is important to you. It's about starting when you feel like stopping, not because you want to work more, but because your goal is important enough to you that you don't simply work on it when it's convenient. Becoming a pro is about making your priorities a reality.

There have been a lot of sets that I haven't felt like finishing, but I've never regretted doing the workout. There have been a lot of articles I haven't felt like writing, but I've never regretted publishing on schedule. There have been a lot of days I've felt like relaxing, but I've never regretted showing up and working on something that is important to me.

Becoming a pro doesn't mean you're a workaholic. It means that you're good at making time for what matters to you — especially when you don't feel like it — instead of playing the role of the victim and letting life happen to you.

How to Become a Pro

Going about your work like a pro isn't easy, but it's also not as complicated or difficult as you might think. There are three steps.

1. Decide what you want to be good at.

Purpose is everything. If you know what you want, then getting it is much easier. This sounds simple, but in my experience even people who are smart, creative, and talented rarely know exactly what they are working for and why.

2. Set a schedule for your actions.

Once you know what you want, set a schedule for actually doing it.

Note: Don't make the same mistake I have made, which is setting a schedule based on results. Don't map out how much weight you want to lose each week or how much money you want to make. "Lose 5 pounds" is not an action you can perform. "Do three sets of squats" is an action you can perform.

You want to set a schedule based on actions you can do, not results that you want.

3. Stick to your schedule for one week.

Stop thinking about how hard it will be to follow a schedule for a month or a year. Just follow it for this week. For the next 7 days, don't let distractions get in the way.

Setting a schedule doesn't make you a professional, following it does. Don't be a writer, be writing. Don't be a lifter, be lifting. For one week, do the things you want to do without letting life get in the way. Next week, start again.

The Power of the Schedule

Ira Glass is the host of the popular radio show This American Life, which is broadcast to 1.7 million listeners each week. This is the advice Glass gives to anyone looking to interesting, creative work: "The most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Do a huge volume of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week or every month you know you're going to finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that … the work you're making will be as good as your ambitions." [6]

If you want to do your best creative work, then don't leave it up to choice. Don't wake up in the morning and think, "I hope I feel inspired to create something today." You need to take the decision-making out of it. Set a schedule for your work. Genius arrives when you show up enough times to get the average ideas out of the way.

The Weird Strategy Dr. Seuss Used to Create His Greatest Work

In 1960, two men made a bet.

There was only $50 on the line, but millions of people would feel the impact of this little wager.

The first man, Bennett Cerf, was the founder of the publishing firm, Random House. The second man was named Theo Geisel, but you probably know him as Dr. Seuss. Cerf proposed the bet and challenged that Dr. Seuss would not be able to write an entertaining children's book using only 50 different words.

Dr. Seuss took the bet and won. The result was a little book called Green Eggs and Ham. Since publication, Green Eggs and Ham has sold more than 200 million copies, making it the most popular of Seuss's works and one of the best-selling children's books in history.

At first glance, you might think this was a lucky fluke. A talented author plays a fun game with 50 words and ends up producing a hit. But there is actually more to this story and the lessons in it can help us become more creative and stick to better habits over the long-run.

Here's what we can learn from Dr. Seuss…

The Power of Constraints

What Dr. Seuss discovered through this little bet was the power of setting constraints.

Setting limits for yourself — whether that involves the time you have to work out, the money you have to start a business, or the number of words you can use in a book — often delivers better results than "keeping your options open."

In fact, Dr. Seuss found that setting some limits to work within was so useful that he employed this strategy for other books as well. For example, The Cat in the Hat was written using only a first-grade vocabulary list.

In my experience, I've seen that constraints can also provide benefits in health, business, and life in general. I've noticed two reasons why this occurs.

1. Constraints inspire your creativity.

If you're five foot five inches tall and you're playing basketball, you figure out more creative ways to score than the six foot five inch guy.

If you have a one-year-old child that takes up almost every minute of your day, you figure out more creative ways to get some exercise.

If you're a photographer and you show up to a shoot with just one lens, then you figure out more creative ways to capture the beauty of your subject than you would with all of your gear available.

Limitations drive you to figure out solutions. Your constraints inspire your

creativity.

2. Constraints force you to get something done.

Time constraints have forced me to produce some of my best work. This is especially true with my writing. Every Monday and Thursday, I write a new article — even if it's inconvenient.

This constraint has led me to produce some of my most popular work in unlikely places. When I was sitting in the passenger seat on a road trip through West Virginia, I wrote an article. When I was visiting family for the 4th of July, I wrote an article. When I spent all day flying in and out of airports, I wrote an article.

Without my schedule (the constraint), I would have pushed those articles to a different day. Or never got around to them at all. Constraints force you to get something done and don't allow you to procrastinate. This is why I believe that professionals set a schedule for their production while amateurs wait until they feel motivated.

What constraints are you setting for yourself? What type of schedule do you have for your goals?

Related note: Sticking to your schedule doesn't have to be grand or impressive. Just commit to a process you can sustain. And if you have to, reduce the scope.

Constraints are Not the Enemy

So often we spend time complaining about the things that are withheld from us.

"I don't have enough time to work out."

"I don't have enough money to start a business."

"I can't eat this food on my diet."

But constraints are not the enemy. Every artist has a limited set of tools to work with. Every athlete has a limited set of skills to train with. Every entrepreneur has a limited amount of resources to build with. Once you know your constraints, you can start figuring out how to work with them.

The Size of Your Canvas

Dr. Seuss was given 50 words. That was the size of his canvas. His job was to see what kind of picture he could paint with those words.

You and I are given similar constraints in our lives.

You only have 30 minutes to fit a workout into your day? So be it. That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to see if you can make those 30 minutes a work of art.

You can only spare 15 minutes each day to write? That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to make each paragraph a work of art.

You only have $100 to start your business? Great. That's the size of your canvas. Your job is to make each sales call a work of art.

There are a lot of authors who would complain about writing a book with only 50 words. But there was one author who decided to take the tools he had available and make a work of art instead.

We all have constraints in our lives. The limitations just determine the size of the canvas you have to work with. What you paint on it is up to you.

How to Be Motivated to Create Consistently

Twyla Tharp was born in Indiana and was named after the local “Pig Princess” at the Annual Muncie Fair, who went by Twila.

It wasn’t the prettiest of starts, but Tharp turned it into something beautiful.

She is widely regarded as one of the greatest dancers and choreographers of the modern era. She has toured across the globe performing her original work. She is credited with choreographing the first crossover ballet and she has choreographed dances for the Paris Opera Ballet, The Royal Ballet, New York City Ballet, Boston Ballet, and many others. Her work has appeared on Broadway, on television, and in films. In 1992, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, often called the “Genius Grant”, for her creative work.

To put it simply: Twyla Tharp is prolific. The question is, how does she do it?

The Power of Ritual

In her best-selling book, The Creative Habit, Tharp discusses one of the secrets of her success:

> *I begin each day of my life with a ritual; I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers,*

> *my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st street and First Avenue, where I workout for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.*
>
> *It's a simple act, but doing it the same way each morning habitualizes it — makes it repeatable, easy to do. It reduces the chance that I would skip it or do it differently. It is one more item in my arsenal of routines, and one less thing to think about.*

Let's talk about what makes Tharp's morning ritual so important and how we can use it to master our own habits.

The Surprising Thing About Motivation

If you have trouble sticking to good habits or fall victim to bad ones, then it can be easy to assume that you simply need to learn how to get motivated or that you don't understand how willpower works.

But here is the surprising thing about motivation: it often comes after starting a new behavior, not before. Getting started is a form of active inspiration that naturally produces momentum.

You have probably experienced this phenomenon before. For example, going

for a run may seem overwhelming or exhausting just to think about before you begin, but if you can muster up the energy to start jogging, you'll often find that you become more motivated to finish as you go. In other words, it's easier to finish the run than it was to start it in the first place.

This is basically Newton's First Law applied to habit formation: objects in motion tend to stay in motion. And that means getting started is the hardest part.

I often find this to be true with my articles. Once I begin writing, it's much easier for me to power through and finish. However, if I'm staring at a blank page, it can seem overwhelming and taxing to take the first step.

And this, my friends, is where Twyla Tharp's morning ritual comes back into the picture.

Rituals Are an On Ramp for Your Behavior

The power of a ritual, or what I like to call a pre-game routine, is that it provides a mindless way to initiate your behavior. It makes starting your habits easier and that means following through on a consistent basis is easier.

Habits researchers agree. Benjamin Gardner, a researcher in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London recently published a paper in the *Health Psychology Review* that covered how we can use habits to initiate longer, more complex routines:

> *A 'habitual' bicycle commuter, for example, may automatically opt to use a bicycle rather than alternative*

> *transport (so automatically enacting the first behaviour in a superordinate 'bicycle commuting' sequence, such as putting on a cycle helmet), but negotiating the journey may require higher-level cognitive input.*

In other words, getting started with a simple ritual like putting on a helmet or checking the air in the bike tires makes it easier to follow through on the bigger behavior (making the commute). If you focus on the ritual, the next step follows more automatically.

Twyla Tharp's morning routine is a perfect example of this idea in practice. Naturally, there are going to be days when she doesn't feel like getting out of bed and exercising. There are bound to be times when the thought of starting the day with a two-hour workout seems exhausting.

But her ritual of waking up and calling the taxi takes the emotion, motivation, and decision-making out of the process. Her brain doesn't need to waste any energy deciding what to do next. She doesn't have a debate with herself about what the first step should be. She simply follows the same pattern that she always does. And once the pattern is in motion, the rest of the sequence follows more easily.

The key to any good ritual is that it removes the need to make a decision: What should I do first? When should I do this? How should I do this? Most people never get moving because they can't decide how to get started. Having a ritual takes that burden off your shoulders.

The Idea in Practice

Here are some other examples of how you can apply ritual and routine to your habits and behaviors:

- Exercise more consistently: Use the same warm up routine in the gym
- Become more creative: Follow a creative ritual before you start writing or painting or singing
- Start each day stress free: Create a five-minute morning meditation ritual
- Sleep better: Follow a “power down” routine before bed

Whatever it is, make it your own. Use your ritual as an on-ramp for the bigger behavior and habits you want to build into your life. When you master the ability to mindlessly initiate the tasks that are important to you, it’s not necessary to rely on motivation and willpower to make them happen.

Where can you use a ritual or routine to help you create more consistently?

Smart People Should Create Things

It was 1974 and Art Fry was spending his weekend singing for the local church choir. On this particular Sunday, Fry was dealing with a relatively boring problem: he couldn't keep his bookmarks in place.

In order to find hymns quickly, Fry would stick little pieces of paper between the pages like bookmarks. The only problem was that every time he stood up, the pieces of paper would slide down deep between the pages or fall out of the book completely. Annoyed by the constant placing and replacing of his bookmarks, Fry started daydreaming about a better solution.

"It was during the sermon," Fry said, "that I first thought, 'What I really need is a little bookmark that will stick to the paper but will not tear the paper when I remove it.'" [7]

With this idea in mind, Fry went back to work the next week and began developing a solution to his bookmark problem. As luck would have it, Fry happened to be working at the perfect company. He was an employee at 3M and one of his co-workers, Spencer Silver, was an adhesives specialist.

Over the next few months, Fry and Silver developed a piece of paper that would stick to a page, but could be easily removed and reapplied over and over. Eventually, this little project became one of the best-selling office supplies of all-time: the Post-It Note.

Today, 3M sells Post-It Notes in over 100 countries worldwide. You can find them at libraries and schools, in offices and boardrooms, and scattered around nearly every workspace in between.

What can we learn from the story of Art Fry? And is there something we can take away from this to make our lives and the world better?

Create Something Small

Art Fry wasn't trying to create a best-selling office supply product. In the beginning, Fry was simply trying to design a better bookmark for his choir hymnal. He was just trying to create something small.

For a long time, I thought that if I wasn't working on something incredible, then it wasn't of much value. But gradually I discovered the truth: the most important thing isn't to create something world-changing, but simply to create. You don't have to build something famous to build something meaningful.

And this brings us to the most important lesson we can learn from Art Fry and his Post-It Notes: when the world presents you with something interesting or frustrating or curious, choose to do something about it. Choose to be a creator.

In other words, the world needs smart people to build things. We need employees who invent things, entrepreneurs who create things, and freelancers who design things. We need secretaries who make jewelry as a side project and stay-at-home dads who write amazing novels. We need more leaders, not more followers. We need more creators, not more consumers.

And perhaps the most important thing to realize is that we not only need to

create for each other, but for ourselves as well. Creating something is the perfect way to avoid wasting the precious moments that we have been given. To contribute, to create, to chip in to the world around you and to add your line to the world's story — that is a life well lived.

What will you create today?

The Next Step: Where to Go From Here

If you enjoyed this guide, then you'll probably love my weekly newsletter. It's totally free and I share science-based ideas and practical strategies for mastering your creative habits and living a better life.

You can sign up here: http://jamesclear.com/newsletter

I don't have it all figured out, but I'm doing my best to walk the slow march toward greatness with you.

James Clear

Sources

1. I couldn't find the original source for this Picasso story and I'm not sure if it's true. The point remains just as strong and compelling either way, but if you know the original source please share.

2. "Markus Zusak talks about the writing of The Book Thief" by Macmillan Publishers Australia

3. Daily Rituals by Mason Currey, pgs. 178-179.

4. This quote came from an Amazon review by John Keezell of Simonton's book, Creativity in Science.

5. Recent research has revealed that the Equal Odds Rule doesn't quite tell the whole story. For example, research shows that deliberate practice matters and that you can improve your skills as time goes on. And as your skills improve, so do your odds of success. In other words, the odds of producing something good start to shift in your favor as your skills improve. Of course, you need to embrace the idea behind The Equal Odds Rule anyway: the only way to improve your skills through deliberate practice is to go through a volume of work. At the end of the day the Equal Odds Rule isn't perfect, but the result is the same: practice more.

6. "Ira Glass, This American Life" interview by Gothamist.

7. Daydream Achiever by Jonah Lehrer

Thanks to Sebastian Marshall for originally telling me about the Equal Odds Rule, to Srini Rao for originally writing about the willingness to create garbage, and to Andrew Yang for inspiring the title of one of the sections in this guide with his book, Smart People Should Build Things.